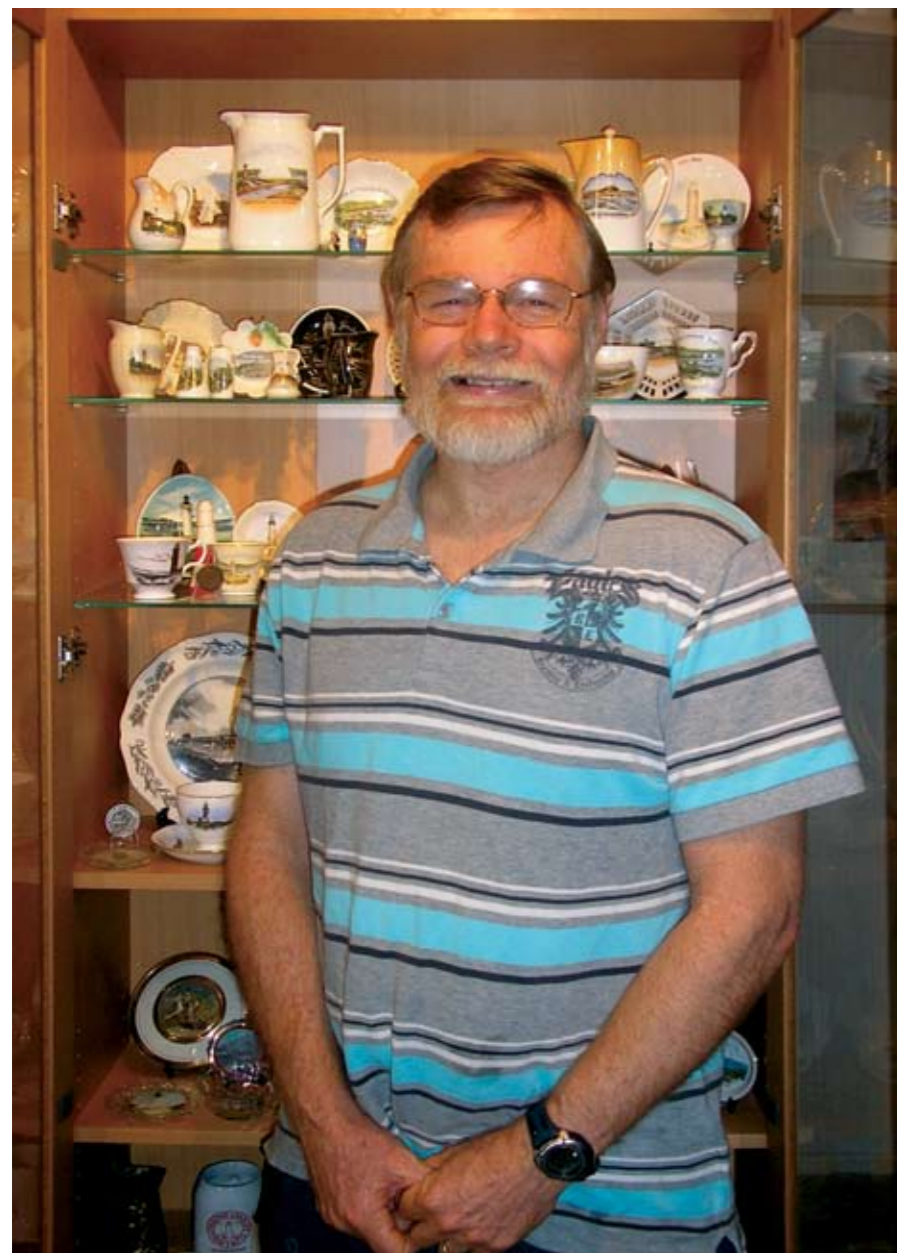


The Lighthouse Keeper

Enchanted by the sea and its stories as a young boy, Bruce Pringle today enjoys the largest authentic Australian lighthouse souvenir collection in the country.

BY BELINDA HOGAN



Bruce Pringle's fascination with the sea and all things nautical began with family beach holidays to Byron Bay and The Sunshine Coast. Artistic, Bruce also started making model ships and painting ocean scenes. Then around 10 years ago, with the pressures of work as a church minister weighing upon his shoulders, Bruce decided to take a holiday to Sydney to recharge his batteries. Little did he know that a ferry ride around the Harbour would spark a specific interest in lighthouses. It was seeing the beauty of The Macquarie and Hornsby Lighthouses that day, which has led Bruce to now having the largest collection of authentic Australian lighthouse souvenir ware in the country. Not only does he passionately collect lighthouse memorabilia, he also makes them, paints them and even stays in them.

Dating back to about 300 BC, lighthouses have been used basically for the same purpose, which is aiding ships and marking dangerous coastlines. They have been integral instruments in wars and have been the subject of poets such as

Robert Louis Stevenson. However these days the job of the lighthouse is limited and the 350 in Australia are unmanned in the traditional sense. Some are still operational, some are used as holiday accommodation, while others have been unfortunately left to decay and ruined by vandals. It is the stories that enchant Bruce so much. "Lighthouses are some of our earliest significant architecture and often the first thing those coming to Australia saw when arriving," he says. "There is something unique in the fact that they have stood the years of time showing us how they became the beacons of hope and safety." The stories of the Lighthouse Keepers and their families is what captures Bruce's imagination. He feels they were a special breed of people who had elements of the pioneers about them. "Everything about them intrigues me," he says. "They had to be self sufficient, they lived in remote areas, and just like me they were always on duty."

It was this love of what lighthouses actually represent that led Bruce to obtaining his first piece of memorabilia. "I purchased a model of the Macquarie Lighthouse, Australia's oldest, approximately eight years ago," he says. "Then my collection really started because my wife began looking for suitable presents for me for my birthday and Christmas." Bruce's wife Merryl is a history buff and she initially started to hunt down early Australian lighthouse postcards. This she knew would ignite Bruce's curiosity about Australians and their social past. "I love to read what visitors wrote about their visit to a lighthouse and their reactions to that visit," he says. "That in itself is historic and I have more than 200 now." Other souvenir ware such as buttons, badges, utility items, books, plates, vases, ashtrays, spoons, models and fittings and relics from the Commonwealth Lighthouse Service have been slowly added to Bruce's collection since then. However it sometimes can be a slow process. "With the scarcity of memorabilia, I collect anything I can," he says. "Because Australia was not heavily populated, there was not a huge amount made, so each is very special."

Bruce's collection is mainly housed in two large wooden cabinets. He explains that although there are 350 lighthouses in Australia, his collection represents only about 50 of them. "Not every lighthouse had memorabilia associated with it," he says. This is another reason why collecting lighthouse memorabilia is difficult. Bruce's earliest piece, from 1895, is a small German made vase depicting the Western Australian Bunbury Lighthouse, which takes pride at the front of his collection. Another is a fine porcelain ashtray from Caloundra with an early lighthouse on it. This is special to Bruce as it reminds him of his childhood holidays





and because of its rarity. “Interestingly I have had a lot of trouble finding anything from Caloundra,” he says. “It is a little strange as it is where us Brisbanites always went for holidays.”

The collection also boasts pieces from the famous Studio Anna pottery house. These pieces are rather expensive as there are many collectors who specialise in this particular brand. There is also a Commonwealth Lighthouse Services badge that holds certain sentimentality for Bruce. He explains he purchased the badge from a Tasmanian seller whose father was a lighthouse keeper. “The seller had lived in lighthouses as a child with his parents,” he says. “Then he sent me a photo of his father in uniform wearing the badge, which is special.” However, it is a 100 year old, solid brass sign from an Australian Lighthouse, which is Bruce’s most favoured treasure. The plaque warning people against trespassing unless they want to pay a penalty of ‘not exceeding 100 pounds,’ now hangs on Bruce’s study door. Given to him last year from his family, Bruce explains it is a rare find. “Well, they used to melt these down because they were brass and weren’t needed,” he

says. “How it came to still exist, who knows?” Bruce says some of his collection occasionally comes from antique stores, however he explains most comes from searching online. “My wife is so dedicated, she looks online every day,” Bruce laughs.

You definitely feel you are on a sandy beach looking out at the ocean when you step into Bruce and Merryl’s home. His oil paintings of Australian lighthouses such as Cape Nelson, Point Lonsdale, Cape Ottway and Iron Pot adorn the walls. He also has a painting of The Hornsby Lighthouse, which captured his imagination all those years ago. With his models, Bruce recreates particular lighthouses such as Point Lowly in South Australia, which sit on tabletops around his house. He uses pine, which his stepfather turns and Bruce finishes them off, complete with camping lanterns.

Unfortunately, with work constraints, Bruce does not have as much time to spend on his artworks as he would like. However he does make sure that he gets away every year to a lighthouse destination for a holiday. He





has visited most in Australia, with his favourite being the Eddystone Lighthouse on Tasmania's northeast coast. "It is made out of the granite rocks that surround it and although it has a rough surface, everything just fits together," he reflects. "It is just very isolated, very beautiful and very special." Recently he completed a 40 kilometre-walking trip with his son Glen and his daughter-in-law Lana on the Great Ocean Road. Camping next to many of the south Victorian coast lighthouses, Bruce this time was lucky enough to stay in the Wilsons Promontory Lighthouse Keeper's Cottage - a gift from his son.

Although lighthouses are no longer operating in traditional ways, the majority are still in use and are run automatically. "There is a sadness in the passing of the lighthouse keeper's tradition," Bruce feels. "But this makes it all the more important that this history is documented." He explains that although his collection will never be complete it will never be lost. "Eventually it will be loaned to a suitable museum," he says, "so that anyone who wishes to learn more about Australian Lighthouse history can find out about it." 🌊